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Parasite

Abstract

This is a film review of *Parasite* (2019), directed by Bong Joon Ho.

Author Notes

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***Parasite (Gisaengchung)*, dir. Bong Joon Ho**

Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=isOGD_7hNIY

Parasite is the latest in genre-bending horror-comedy from acclaimed director Bong Joon Ho of South Korea, this year's *Palme D'Or* winner at the Cannes Film Festival. Like Bong's previous films *Okja* (2017) and *Snowpiercer* (2013), *Parasite* is a darkly hilarious look at capitalism's absurdities, this time in Bong's home country. While religion is not mentioned explicitly in the film, Bong's reflections on capitalism and its relationship to the nature of reality lend themselves to discussions of fate, transcendence, belief, and affect. Since the film hinges on several twists, I will not spoil any here, hoping that the spirit of the film comes through where plot points are left to the imagination. This is a fantastic movie and my favorite Bong project to date.

Ultimately this is a story about class. *Parasite* opens on a wide short window fronted by bars, the Kim family's view onto the street from their semi-basement apartment. Ki-woo and Ki-jeong, son and daughter, hold their mobile phones in the air and wander the claustrophobic apartment, lamenting that their neighbor has suddenly put a password on their wireless internet. Mother, father, sister, and brother are all unemployed and they spend much of their time eating in front of the window, joking, devising ways to make money, and cursing inebriated passersby who always seem to choose *their* window for urinating. Ki-woo and Ki-jeong find a new free internet signal in the bathroom by crouching over the toilet together.

Then there are the Parks, whose lives seem to be an inversion of the Kims.' Theirs is a huge home designed and previously occupied by a famous architect, again centered on a picture window, this time floor-to-ceiling and overlooking an immaculate lawn. The Parks live lavishly and enjoy the service of a loyal housekeeper, a driver, and various tutors for sister Da-hye and brother Da-song. Their house sits on a hill many long staircases and winding roads above the squalor of the city below, encased in a concrete wall and boasting direct access to the sky. When a violent storm hits the city in act two, the Parks lounge on a sofa to watch the rain while the Kims descend from their home in attempts to save their subterranean apartment from drowning in overflowing human excrement: excrement that pours down from the genteel residences above.

When Kim Ki-woo begins working for the Parks on a friend's recommendation, Bong sets in motion a story that asks, simply, how people can live together under such conditions. The title of the film suggests a relationship both symbiotic and unnerving, and *Parasite* explores what underlies this unease. Parasitic relationships are fundamentally unequal—the invader leeches but cannot survive without the host—and often imperceptible. As Ki-woo and then his sister ingratiate themselves with the Parks, they reveal a willingness to undermine the wealthy family's interests in order to benefit their own. At the same time, the Parks are condescending and naive, often to the Kims' delight, and waste no time establishing their superiority over the new arrivals. Which family is the truly greedy one? When we operate under a shared system of beliefs about money and its power, who deserves blame for creating an environment in which people find themselves so deeply divided?

Capitalism figures as a transcendent force that guides the story's destructive momentum, and throughout the film you get the feeling that everything is inevitable, a sense that in itself drives much of the story's comedic force. The viewer is in on the joke but the joke is on us, too. How much do we really know or admit about what makes our lives possible? To what extent are we driven by forces that we do not see or understand? After seeking shelter in a sports arena overnight because of the flood mentioned above, Kim Ki-taek tells his son, "You know what kind of plan never fails? No plan. No plan at all. You know why? Because life

cannot be planned... It doesn't matter what will happen next. Even if the country gets destroyed or sold out, nobody cares. Got it?" Ki-taek's nihilism reflects broader concerns in South Korea about one's neighbors and their capacity for harm, but he also points to the bare fact that under this "crabs in a bucket" regime, it is ultimately unwise to count on your future. Powers exist beyond our comprehension—capitalism as god—and result in a bleak predestination.

Capitalism distorts our perception of reality in other ways, too. Early in the film we learn that Park Da-song suffers from nightmares and has undergone a mysterious trauma, however the full truth of the event is only revealed later: he has seen a ghost. In a flashback scene, Da-song walks downstairs in the dark after a birthday party and sits beneath the open fridge, eating leftover cake, then glances at the staircase leading to the basement. Out from the dark, two yellow eyes leer from the top half of a pale, bald head. Da-song screams and begins convulsing in panic as his terrified mother runs to him. It is only in retrospect that the audience learns the significance of this event. What Da-song saw was really there, though no one believes him: a ghost, yes, but a certain type. This spirit was driven to its meagre state by an economic system, and like any soul trapped in a liminal existence, this spirit haunts the living. Da-song's ordeal tells us that capitalism has ghosts of its own, whether we believe in them or not.

In the film's masterful final scene, we see the affective impact of the desperation that can seethe beneath economic disparity. While the Kims take pains

to disguise their material reality to others, the Parks dismiss anyone who does not participate correctly in theirs. Mr. Park comments on how “good” staff know never to “cross the line,” meaning how they speak, how they smell, and what evidence of themselves they leave behind. Mr. Kim responds to him with a suppressed scowl. Over the course of the film Bong emphasizes the materiality of these polarized worlds: windows left open to let in clouds of poisonous gas, a knife scraping off the fragrant fuzz of a peach, a scuttling insect flicked from a table. And a few times, when another character almost glimpses the reality underlying their situation, it is because they catch a whiff of it.